



Stress the Positive

It isn't possible to eliminate every source of tension in life, no matter how many mantras or crystals you collect. But researchers say you can reframe the way your mind processes that panicked feeling, and flip it into a powerful force for good.

TEXT BY JENNIFER KING LINDLEY

YEAR-END DEADLINES LOOM. Your knee is doing that weird thing again. And you have a 15-pound turkey to brine, stat. Stress, from sources big and small, can make you want to hole up in a Himalayan salt cave. But a growing number of mental-health experts recommend adopting a surprising and much more sustainable attitude: *Bring it on.*

"There's no such thing as a problem-free life," says Melanie Greenberg, Ph.D., author of *The Stress-Proof Brain* (New Harbinger, 2017). "Seeing the stress response as energizing and many triggers as opportunities to learn and grow can be very helpful." Research suggests that people who take up a stress-is-enhancing mind-set, rather than a stress-is-debilitating one, perform better under pressure at work and can have fewer related health issues. This is because the sensation ultimately isn't our enemy; it's the fight-or-flight instinct that has protected us since we were cave people. When we perceive danger—*saber-toothed tiger at three*

o'clock!—our bodies automatically ready themselves for action. Our breathing quickens, our heart pumps harder, and our immune system ramps up. Tiger vanquished, we return to calm. The trouble is, many aspects of modern life (email notifications, the cable-news crawl) constantly set off our alarms. Over time, being stuck in overdrive like that can harm the cardiac and immune systems. As if that weren't bad enough, it's linked to memory impairment and depression, too.

This is where attitude comes in. If you can learn to view tricky times as challenges you're equipped to handle, rather than as perils to flee or boil over about, you can turn down your body's perpetual emergency setting. By facing hassles directly and more positively, says Greenberg, "we start to see ourselves as resilient, capable, even brave." Now square your shoulders and get started.

INVERT ACUTE STRESS

Spikes of high tension (such as before giving a big presentation) can be paralyzing. But you can put that nerve-racking energy to work in your favor.

REINTERPRET YOUR PHYSICAL CUES. Sweaty palms and a pounding heart don't mean you're on the cusp of disaster. Seen through a different lens, they're evidence your body is preparing you to triumph. A 2013 Harvard Business School study asked subjects to give a speech; those who were instructed to interpret their anxious feelings as excitement were more confident and were rated as more persuasive than those who were told to try to calm down. Researchers suggest recasting the physical details—tell yourself, *My faster breathing is getting more oxygen to my brain!*

SURFACE THE SILVER LINING. Rather than letting thoughts about potential negative outcomes steamroll you, list positive ones, says Greenberg. What do you have to gain? Consider the big picture here: your values and goals behind the task at hand. "We stress most about the stuff we care deeply about," says Alia Crum, Ph.D., an assistant professor of psychology at Stanford University. "Changing your focus can help you go from feeling annoyed to feeling purposeful."

GET A HEALTHY DISTANCE. Viewing yourself and your predicament as if you were a fly on the wall allows you to tackle it more calmly and effectively, per a 2017 study in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*. Subjects were asked to pitch themselves for their dream job and prepped

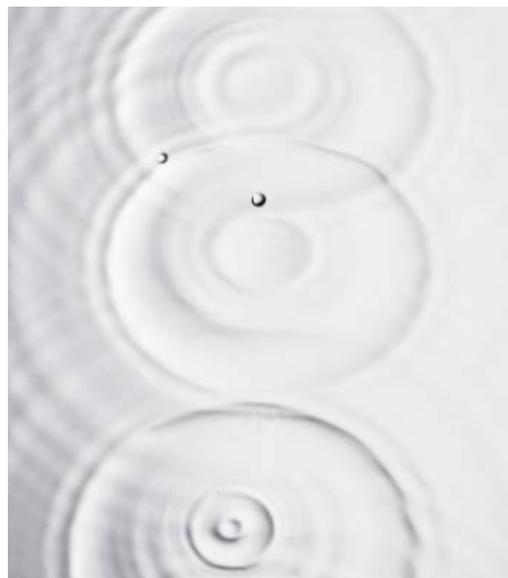
by writing for a few minutes, either in first person or third person. Researchers then recorded their cardiac vitals during the pitches, and the third-person group responded in measurably healthier ways, including less constricted blood vessels. The outside perspective "seems to help you approach a task with more confidence in your resources to handle it," explains Mark Seery, Ph.D., a psychology professor at the State University of New York at Buffalo, who led the study.

COMMANDEER CHRONIC STRESS

This is the day-in-day-out stuff, stemming from ongoing issues (money problems) or a series of smaller ones (a commute from heck). Use these strategies to rise above.

PINPOINT THINGS YOU CAN CHANGE. "The highest level of stress happens when you feel you have no control," says psychotherapist Amy Morin, author of *13 Things Mentally Strong People Don't Do* (William Morrow, 2014). "So even in difficult circumstances, look for small pieces of the situation where you have choices." If you have a chronic health condition, for example, actively seek out a doctor you really click with.

LEAN ON LOVED ONES. There's a biological reason you get the urge to call a BFF or close sibling when you feel down. Stress releases a chemical called oxytocin (aka the bonding hormone), which causes what scientists call the "tend and befriend" instinct. Connecting with others is a proven calming tactic, so don't isolate yourself.



INDULGE A LITTLE. Self-care isn't another word for procrastination. On the contrary, taking breaks to do things you enjoy can increase productivity. For a 2016 study in the *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research*, subjects logged daily annoyances (a dead phone battery) and pleasures (stargazing). The ones who listed more simple hits of happiness got more done. "Those moments counteract negative feelings," says study author Vanessa Patrick-Ralhan, Ph.D., a professor of marketing at the University of Houston's Bauer College of Business. "They give you energy to accomplish your goals."

INTERRUPT YOUR OWN STORY. Much of the worry we feel comes not from the actual facts of a situation, but from the narrative we choose to tell ourselves about it. Moreover, ruminating on one plot point keeps us in stress mode, with an elevated cortisol level. So cut yourself off by getting up and doing something physical. "Wash the dishes. Go for a stroll," says Morin. "It changes the channel in your brain."

REVEL IN RESILIENCE. In a 2010 study, Seery found that the emotionally healthiest subjects had experienced significant adversities, such as divorce, the loss of a loved one, or a grave illness. "Emerging on the other side toughens you," says Seery. "You develop an automatic tendency to think, *I can do this.*" When you face something hard, try keeping a journal, suggests Beth Kurland, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist and author of *Dancing on the Tightrope: Transcending the Habits of Your Mind and Awakening to Your Fullest Life* (Wellbridge, 2018). Which skills and strengths got you through? Who supported you? Note what success feels like, too. "Looking back will help you face the next stressor," Kurland says. "You'll learn to see yourself as a coper."